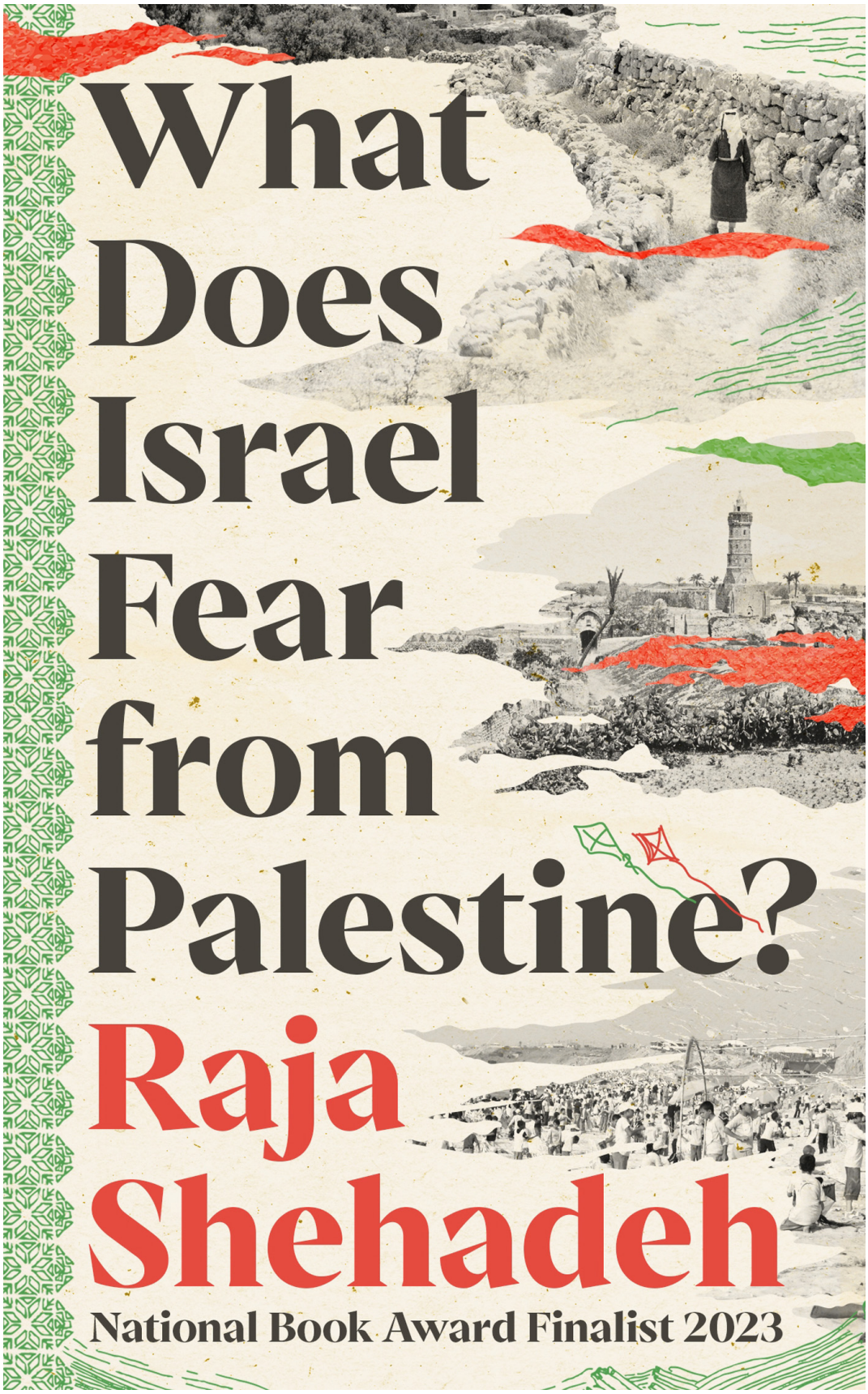
What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?

Raja Shehadeh

National Book Award Finalist 2023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Raja Shehadeh is Palestine's leading writer. He is also a lawyer and the founder of the pioneering Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq. Shehadeh is the author of several acclaimed books published by Profile, including the Orwell Prize-winning *Palestinian Walks* and *We Could Have Been Friends, My Father and I*, which was a 2023 National Book Award finalist. He lives in Ramallah.

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To Andrew Franklin –
friend, publisher and long-time editor
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PART ONE

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of hope in the world. The Cold War seemed to be over. In the summer of 1987 David Bowie sang at the Berlin Wall, as if preparing the way for what would happen there two years later when, on 9 November 1989, the spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party announced a change in the city's relations with the West. Starting at midnight, citizens of the GDR would be free to cross the country's borders. The Wall had fallen.

Meanwhile in South Africa positive developments were taking place that culminated in elections being held on 27 April 1994 in which all South Africans, whatever their colour, were able to vote. When South Africa repealed the Population Registration Act – by which rights were withheld on the basis of racial segregation – the apartheid system was effectively ended.

The first question I want to ask here is why hopeful events like these that resulted in the resolution of long-standing endemic injustices didn't inspire the Israeli government to end the occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, resolve outstanding issues between Palestinians and Israelis and usher in a lasting peace? Then there are two related questions: why didn't the world put its weight behind moves to make this happen; and, thinking about the current situation, what role might the Gaza war, with its terrible human toll, play – if any – in bringing about the beginning of a global shift?

There are no simple answers, but I want to suggest some new ways to think about these problems.

In the past, when I asked left-leaning Israeli friends why the end of apartheid in South Africa was not an inspiration for Israelis, I received two different answers. The first was that the whites in South Africa lost whereas the Israelis have not. This idea distressed me, because it indicated that they

believed the end of white supremacy meant defeat for the white population. They apparently couldn't see that it was in fact a victory for both sides. The second, more convincing, answer was that the Israelis did not see their situation as being in any way akin to apartheid and so did not think that it needed a similar resolution.

Some readers might be wondering why I was asking these questions when the answer is obvious. The world made an effort to get the parties together in 1991 with the convening of the International Peace Conference in Madrid in the presence of Arab states and Israel. And this effort eventually ended in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accords, celebrated by the famous handshake on the White House lawn between Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, which was shown repeatedly on TV screens all over the world. But before I elaborate on why I believe these events offered only illusory hopes, I want to go back to the second answer given by Israelis to explain the lack of any positive inspiration and the failure to link the apartheid regime in South Africa and the situation in Israel/ Palestine.

To understand the difference between how Israelis see the history of their state and how Palestinians see it, we need to go back to the formative events of 1948, the year the state of Israel was established, and reflect on the Nakba, or 'Catastrophe', which is the term used by Palestinians to describe what happened then.

Israel talks of the 1948 war as its war of independence. This is strange, because by doing so the country is suggesting that it gained its independence from the British. But it was the British who, in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – over a century ago – promised the land, with its majority of Palestinian Arabs, to the Jews. The declaration stated that 'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people …' And it was the British who worked throughout the British Mandate over Palestine from 1922 to 1948 to facilitate the creation of a Jewish state there in accordance with the terms of that mandate. I would suggest that the real reason why it makes this claim is that Israel was anxious to position itself within the group of decolonised nations.

The new country proceeded without delay to reinvent history in such a way as to exclude any recognition of the presence of the original non-Jewish inhabitants, not only forcing most of them out but also removing any

sign of their former presence and history in the land. In support of this, Israel treated the Bible as a historical document and used it to back up the claim that the land had belonged to Jews from time immemorial, having been promised to them by the Almighty.

In other words, in 1948 there was an attempt to rewrite the entire history of Palestine: this was year zero, after which a new history would begin with the in-gathering of Jews to their historic homeland, Israel. The towns and villages from which the Palestinians were forced out were quickly demolished and a worldwide campaign was waged to seek contributions for planting trees in the forests that were established where these villages had once stood, in order to completely conceal their prior existence. In some cases new Israeli towns and kibbutzim were constructed over these ruins and Hebrew names were given to them. The National Naming Committee was a public body appointed by the government of Israel to replace Arabic names that had existed until 1948 with Hebrew ones, although traces of the Arabic names haunted the process. Thus the name of the famous Ramon Crater in the Negev is derived not from the Hebrew adjective *ram* (meaning 'elevated'), as Israeli guidebooks state, but from the Arabic Wadi Rumman (Valley of Pomegranates), and Nahal Roded was formerly Wadi Raddadi.[1] A new geography was in the making, transforming the country where Palestinians had once lived.

For the Israeli Jews there was a lot to get to grips with and much energy was expended in building up the new nation, an Israeli Jewish nation, in a land that had in large part belonged to another people, the Palestinian Arabs. But while this was a mission for the Israeli Jews, for the Palestinians it was another story.

For the disenfranchised it was a confusing time. Over 700,000 Palestinians who were forced out during and after the 1948 war had to manage to survive after losing their land, their property and their whole way of life. For the Palestinian minority who managed to remain in their villages and cities in what became Israel, it was an equally bewildering time, especially when they were forced to celebrate Independence Day in the country that had usurped their own.

This is best evoked, using satire and self-deprecating humour, by the dramatist Salim Dau in his play *Sag Salem*, in which he describes how Palestinians in Israel were taught in school the same myth that whole generations of Israeli youth have been brought up on – namely that Israeli

Jews fought and won their independence from the British. Not only does this deny the presence of the Palestinian Arabs from whom the land had to be wrenched, but it also falsifies history by failing to credit the British contribution to the creation of Israel, most notably through the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the very terms of the British Mandate in Palestine. Moreover, it places Israel rather strangely in the family of nations that have overcome imperialism and secured their independence from colonisers. Salim Dau and his fellow villagers knew that once you became a citizen of the new state you had to celebrate its Independence Day, otherwise you'd be viewed with suspicion.

What was young Salim to make of this, when his fellow villagers were not allowed to return to their homes and were called 'infiltrators' when they tried, as if returning to the place they had lived all their life was an act of sabotage? And how strange it must have been for those who had just lost everything to have to swallow their pride and celebrate the Independence Day of the country that had caused the Nakba.

At a performance of his play in Ramallah's Cultural Palace in the summer of 2013, Salim offered us a different take. In satirical mode he informed us, his Ramallah audience, that the only time he and his fellow villagers felt free was on Israel's Independence Day, when they had time off work. The women would prepare food and everyone then crowded into trucks – no parking tickets were issued that day – and headed off for a picnic, cheering and singing loudly when they drew near a police car. They would reach Lake Tiberias in northern Israel early, spread out their rugs close to the water and start their barbecue fires, singing and dancing all the while. As he described it, 'Every year a few people died swimming. Why not? We Arabs drown in their independence. Then in the evening we would feel sad and depressed at having to return home. Here our freedom ends … so that the freedom of others, which is democracy, can begin.' This last phrase Salim declaimed loudly, as one chanting a slogan.

While he and the other estimated 160,000 Palestinians who managed to stay in what became Israel had to endure their strange new fate, the generation of Palestinians born in the West Bank after 1948, on the other side of the Armistice border or Green Line, lived under Jordanian rule in almost total ignorance of what was happening in neighbouring Israel.

The conceit goes that prior to the 'return' of the exiled Jews there was a land devoid of people. The Palestinians who happened to be there only

arrived when the first Zionist colonisation began, because this created economic opportunities for them. Otherwise the land was fallow, an empty desert waiting for 2,000 years for its original and true owners, the Jews, to return and populate it once again. It is no coincidence that this is the exact justification given by colonialists throughout history the world over.

Ridiculous as this account might now sound, it was widely held at the time and continues to be propagated and, what is even stranger, accepted by most people in the world. There is still no Hebrew word for the greatest catastrophe that the establishment of Israel caused the Palestinians which we call our Nakba. And recently commemoration of the Nakba in Israel was made illegal by law. Insisting on this version of reality in his meeting with President Macron in Paris on 10 December 2017, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said that before they could come to the negotiating table, the Palestinians would have to recognise the historic reality that Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel for 3,000 years. As evidence for this, he turned to the Bible.

That the Palestinians must accept this travesty as a prerequisite for moving towards peace confirms that even the most absurd definition of reality is determined by those with power. For nearly fifty-seven years Israel has had the power to deny the applicability of the secular law of nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including eastern Jerusalem – all occupied territories recognised as such by the community of nations – and instead to base its claims on the Bible.

On 5 November 2018 Netanyahu stated, ‘Power is the most important thing in foreign policy. “Occupation” is nonsense. There are powerful states that have occupied and transferred populations, and no one talks about them.’[2]

*

The loss of Palestine in 1948 came as a shock and led to decades of despair for Palestinians. They had not believed that the small Jewish community in Palestine would succeed in driving out most Palestinians from their homes and replacing them with Jews. In part, this was a failure of imagination, due to the experiential gap that existed between the zealous Jewish fighters, many of whom had been witnesses to the Holocaust, and the unsuspecting

Palestinians. And this was horribly similar to what happened to us after 1967, when as a result of the June War Israel conquered and occupied the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Gaza and Sinai. We also failed to imagine that Israel could get away with settling over 750,000 Israeli Jews in our midst in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem. It used to take us a whole year to build a single house. The idea of the Israelis commandeering an entire hill, building houses for a Jewish settlement and managing to supply it with water and electricity at speed was beyond us. How could we have imagined that in these remote locations new settlements would be established that would sweep away the olive groves, changing the entire character of the area we knew and replacing our terraced hills with a concrete landscape, row upon row of uniform houses and straight, multi-lane highways?

A prominent Israeli novelist has repeated what many other Israeli propagandists have said, that the establishment of Israel was nothing short of a miracle. As revelations from the recently opened archives confirm, it was no miracle at all. Given the balance of military power and planning, it was predictable that the Zionists would win the 1948 war against the so-called seven Arab armies that fought to prevent the establishment of the state. The real miracle was Israel's success in ridding the land of its people, while continuing to deny what happened without any international rebuke or pressure to implement the Palestinians' right of return. Despite all our attempts at writing about the situation, we Palestinians seem not to have made a dent in the way these events were seen by Israelis and indeed the outside world.

So how did the Arabic word *nakba* come to be used to describe what happened in 1948? The hostilities between Israeli and Arab forces that eventually led to the forcing out of the majority of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of what became Israel were a defeat for the Arab side and a resounding victory for the Israeli side. The Arabic word for defeat is *hazimeh.* But this was not the word chosen to describe what happened. Why?

A defeat usually means that a society or nation suffers a setback, has its values called into question. It might take many years for it to pull itself together, rebuild what it has lost and perhaps rise again. This is what happened in 1945 to Germany and to Japan after the Second World War. To different extents both had all or parts of their territories occupied by the

victors. And both soon developed into powerful nations. But the case of Palestine is different.

What happened in Palestine was the utter dissolution of the nation. The people were forced out of their homeland and dispersed, one part in the Gaza Strip under Egypt, another in the West Bank and East Jerusalem under Jordan, and the rest scattered in refugee camps in surrounding countries. Yet they were not defined within the UN Refugee Convention as refugees. The Palestinians who were forced out of their homes in 1948 were not regarded by Israel as refugees. That would have implied that Palestine was their country, to which they should be allowed to return. On both counts this was not how the Israeli authorities saw it, and they did their best to make sure the return would never happen. In addition, the Palestinian refugees were not placed under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) when it was established in 1951. Rather than be placed under the UNHCR and be subject to the legal regime of international refugees established in 1951, they were accorded special status and a unit was created by the UN specifically to take care of them. This was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), from whose title the word ‘refugees’ is remarkable by its absence (although the full name includes ‘for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East’). The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol excludes Palestine refugees as long as they receive assistance from UNRWA. And yet this did not stop the right-wing Israeli government from doing its best to destroy that organisation. The latest attempt was during the current Gaza war, when Israel accused ten UNRWA employees of participating in the 7 October 2023 killings, leading major donors to withhold their funding to UNRWA, which provides services to nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees in three countries and in the Occupied Territories, including eastern Jerusalem.

With the creation of Israel, Palestine ceased to exist. To this day Israel refuses to recognise the existence of the Palestinians as a nation entitled to exercise self-determination. This situation became starker with the outbreak of the Gaza war, as in the course of fighting Hamas the Israeli army has proceeded to kill tens of thousands, to destroy homes and to demolish Palestinian universities, museums and historical sites as though to obliterate Palestinian existence.

To describe what befell the Palestinian nation in 1948 a word stronger than defeat with a different connotation was needed. After much

deliberation, the word that came to be used was *nakba*, because what happened was no less than a total catastrophe. Yet catastrophe denies the victim agency: it is as though a physical catastrophe, a natural disaster, befell the Palestinians in the face of which they were powerless. Until the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the late 1960s, Palestinian refugees had no voice and were generally passive. The PLO gave them agency and they embraced the armed struggle against Israel.

The Israeli version of what happened in 1948 is the dominant narrative, and it is a narrative supported by that most popular of books, the Bible, not to mention by sympathy in the wake of one of the worst atrocities in modern history, the Holocaust. It was against this background that the Palestinians had to tell the world their version of what befell them in 1948 and we are still not successful in getting this across.

In his essay 'Permission to Narrate', the Palestinian scholar Edward Said pointed out that even as Palestinians were supported by the legality, legitimacy and authority of international law, resolutions and consensus, which is the case to this day, US policymakers and media outlets simply refused to 'make connections, draw conclusions, [and] state the simple facts'. This refusal remains a mainstay of US media and politics, including a rejection of the central truth that the Palestinian narrative 'stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine'.[3]

The Nakba was the most central and formative experience of my life. I was born, after it occurred, in the town of Ramallah in the West Bank, where my family was exiled from their coastal home in the bustling city of Jaffa. All the talk as I grew up was of the lost land and the shock and horror of what had happened to us, with evidence of the suffering all around us.

I remember how my grandmother, who was forced out of Jaffa in April 1948, would look at the lights on the horizon across the hills from Ramallah and believe she was looking at the lights of Jaffa. Her eyes were always on the horizon, and by following her gaze I too learned to avoid seeing what was here and to fix my sight on the distant lights. I saw Ramallah and its hills not for what they were but as the observation point from which to view what lay beyond, which was the Jaffa I had never known. We would be walking home in the evening and she would stop me at the top of the hill before going down the street leading to our house. 'Look,' she would say. 'Look at the lights on the horizon.' And she would stand in reverent silence.

I would stand next to her, her soft warm hand in mine, and hold my breath as I tried to concentrate all my attention on the horizon, imagining what sort of place these lights illuminated. For a long time I was hostage to the memories, perceptions and attitudes of others that I could not abandon. My sense of place was not my own. But I never thought I had the right to claim it. My elders knew better. I felt it was natural to defer to them on such matters.

Then, in June 1967, Israel won another war against Arab states and proceeded to occupy, among other territories, eastern Jerusalem, the West Bank of the River Jordan and the Gaza Strip, thus completing the takeover of the entire territory of Palestine. This included Ramallah.

With the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, where I've lived all my life, I was able to visit Jaffa. Thus it was that I began to shift my gaze from the horizon and closer to home, to the hills on which I lived. It was also then that I realised the lights my grandmother and I were seeing on the horizon from Ramallah were the lights of Tel Aviv, not Jaffa.

After the war successive Israeli governments refused to even contemplate peace with the Palestinians and the colonisation of Palestine continued in earnest. I was sixteen when this second phase began. The occupation soon turned into another Nakba, albeit this time a gradual one, but with similar features: denial of our existence on the land, renaming and reconfiguring it, creating a new geography and refusing to observe international law.

If I did not witness but only heard about the first phase of the colonisation of Palestine, I was there watching and witnessing the second phase.

What happened in 1967 was a similar process of settling the land, claiming it exclusively for members of the Jewish faith and refusing to recognise that Israel is not a sovereign but an occupier of these territories to which the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 applies. Thus, contrary to the applicable international law, Israel proceeded to establish Israeli settlements just a few months after the start of the occupation and Israeli citizens were encouraged to move with offers of material incentives and tax breaks. This process has never wavered to this day. Indeed, it has accelerated. With Israel's present right-wing government it has speeded up, with more settlements and more roads causing further destruction to the hills of the West Bank.

From the early 1980s, when I began following what Israel was doing with the establishment of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and bringing its people to live there, I believed it could not end any other way than as apartheid. And I was not alone in thinking this. In 1976 Yitzhak Rabin, who served as Israel's defence minister during the First Intifada – a series of sustained protests and civil disobedience which lasted from 1987 to 1993 – and as its prime minister during the negotiations and signing of the Oslo Accords, gave an interview in which he compared the then existing sixty settlements as 'a cancer in the social and democratic tissue of the state of Israel'.[4] He was critical of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), the organisation that initially spearheaded the settlement movement in Israel, describing it as 'a group that takes the law into its own hands'. At that time I didn't consider that the threat Gush Emunim posed was real. How would they manage to force us out? I asked. Are we not *samidin*, 'those who stay put'? Unlike in 1948, we didn't leave our homes when the 1967 war erupted.[5] And given the objective Israel was pursuing of encouraging Palestinians to leave, staying put whatever the cost became an effective form of struggle. *Sumud*, I believed, was our collective way of challenging the occupation. Whatever the Israeli military did to make us leave, we would not go. I was encouraged by Rabin, who, in that same interview, said, 'I don't say with certainty that we won't reach [the point of] evacuation, because of the [Palestinian] population. I don't think it's possible to contain over the long term, if we don't want to get to apartheid, a million and a half [more] Arabs inside a Jewish state.'

I didn't think I had to worry too much about a delusional fringe group like Gush Emunim. They couldn't survive. But as the settlements began to spread I realised that, while they might be deranged, they were serious and the Likud government, headed by Menachem Begin, which took over in 1977, was behind them. Begin was no champion of peace or of reconciliation with the Palestinian people, whom he refused to recognise. In an article published in 1970 in the Israeli daily *Maariv*, Begin had made his position clear:

> If a Jew, or a Zionist, a minister or spokesman, acknowledges the Palestinisation of the Jewish-Arab conflict, he still has no authority to determine that Israel ends here and Palestine begins there, or vice versa. He has accepted our enemies' main argument. He has betrayed

> that of his own people. If this be the Land of Israel, we have returned to it. If it is Palestine, we have invaded it. If Eretz Israel it be, we have established legitimate rule throughout it; if it be Palestine, our rule is not legitimate in any area of it.[6]

Ariel Sharon, who was appointed minister of defence by Begin in 1981 and later became Israel's prime minister, had other thoughts, and a very different attitude to settlements from Rabin. He was not worried about the presence of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and was planning to deal with us in the same way the apartheid regime in South Africa dealt with black South Africans. That year Sharon secretly visited South Africa. While he was being briefed about the country, he told his aide that what he most wanted to know about was the Bantustans, how they were structured and administered. He was obviously planning a similar fate for the Palestinians – for those of us who were living in the West Bank and Gaza. He invited one of the Bantustan presidents to visit Israel, where he was met with great pomp and ceremony. This president also visited a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and in his speech called this 'a historic day'. That was when I first suspected that Israel intended to learn from the apartheid regime with its homelands designated for the black population. In time I was proved right.

Meir Kahane, an American-born Orthodox rabbi who established the militant Jewish Defense League (JDL) in New York in 1968, moved with his family to Israel in 1971 after being charged with conspiring to make bombs. Once in Israel he founded the anti-Arab Kach (Hebrew for 'thus') political party. Its platform was the annexation of all the Occupied Territories and the forcible removal of all Palestinians. The party was banned from the 1992 elections because of its racist principles. Later it was declared a terror group and was outlawed. Yet its ideology continues to attract members in Israel. The present minister of security, Itamar Ben Gvir, whose political career began when he was just seventeen in Kahane's Kach party, is an outspoken adherent of the movement and puts its beliefs into practice using his ministerial powers as a member of Netanyahu's right-wing government.

For twenty-five years I have studied the development of Israeli legal language in the West Bank. I have monitored how the Israeli state has been extended into the Occupied Territories through the acquisition of land and

its registration in the Israel Land Authority. I have seen how large areas were defined as Israeli Regional Councils and included within Israel. How in 2003 Israel began building the Separation Wall, which was used to divide Palestinian communities and inhibit freedom of movement. How the land planning schemes were amended to favour Israeli Jews, so that one area after another became, to all intents and purposes, annexed to Israel, and our towns and villages were left as islands within those Israeli extensions, fulfilling Ariel Sharon's promise made in the early 1980s that Israel was going to create 'an entirely different map of the country'. It was all done ostensibly through 'legal' manoeuvres, using the law in force in the West Bank, because formally speaking the West Bank was not annexed to Israel.

When Israel's ally the South African apartheid regime fell, Israel did not get the more optimistic message that it was possible for Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews to live together as blacks and whites came to live together in a democratic country.

Let us return to the glimmer of hope in 1991 for a possible breakthrough of peace and the resolution of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. An international peace conference was convened in Madrid, hosted by Spain and co-sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union, to revive the Israel–Palestine peace process through negotiations involving Israel and the Palestinians as well as Arab countries including Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Despite the restrictive terms of reference, the words spoken by the head of the Palestinian delegation to the conference, Dr Haidar Abdul Shafi, who also headed the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, gave me much hope. They included the following positive message to Israel:

> We, the people of Palestine, stand before you in the fullness of our pain, our pride and our anticipation, for we long harboured a yearning for peace and a dream of justice and freedom. For too long, the Palestinian people have gone unheeded, silenced and denied. Our identity negated by political expediency; our right for struggle against injustice maligned; and our present existence subdued by the past tragedy of another people. For the greater part of this century we have been victimised by the myth of a land without a people and described with impunity as the invisible Palestinians. Before such wilful blindness, we refused to disappear or to accept a distorted

> identity. Our Intifada is a testimony to our perseverance and resilience waged in a just struggle to regain our rights. It is time for us to narrate our own story, to stand witness as advocates of truth which has long lain buried in the consciousness and conscience of the world. We do not stand before you as supplicants, but rather as the torch-bearers who know that, in our world of today, ignorance can never be an excuse. We seek neither an admission of guilt after the fact, nor vengeance for past inequities, but rather an act of will that would make a just peace a reality.
>
> He then addressed Israel with the following call:
>
> Let us share hope, instead. We are willing to live side by side on the land and the promise of the future. Sharing, however, requires two partners, willing to share as equals. Mutuality and reciprocity must replace domination and hostility for genuine reconciliation and coexistence under international legality. Your security and ours are mutually dependent, as entwined as the fears and nightmares of our children. We have seen some of you at your best and at your worst. For the occupier can hide no secrets from the occupied.[7]

When I heard these words I was thrilled. Were these not what Israelis had been hoping to hear? Yet in his closing remarks at the peace conference the then Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, rather than welcoming this invitation to make peace, accused Haidar Abdul Shafi of ‘twisting history and perversion of fact’.

After the three years of negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis that followed the conference, the agreement that emerged proved to be a bitter disappointment. With the Oslo Accords Israel managed to further the implementation of the South African apartheid model by repackaging the occupation without ending it, transferring civilian matters to a newly created Palestinian Authority while keeping the majority of the land under Israeli de facto sovereignty. Israel was also enabled to pursue and indeed accelerate its settlement project in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and eastern Jerusalem, controlling the borders and creating Palestinian Bantustans. Moreover, it learned not to hand-pick leaders there but to allow elections where they were chosen.

Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement which emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood during the First Intifada (1987–93), opposed the Oslo Accords. Continuing to advocate armed resistance, it engaged in a series of suicide bombings in the wake of the massacre of twenty-nine Palestinians by Baruch Goldstein in 1994 at the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron.

Hamas boycotted the first elections for a Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996 but a decade later re-entered the legislative process and engaged in the last elections in 2006, gaining a substantial number of seats in what I believe was largely a protest vote against the ruling party, Fatah. In early 2017 Hamas issued a new 'Political Document', by which it accepted the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and UN Resolution 194 for the return of the refugees. According to Tareq Baconi, 'This initiative went largely unnoticed. Netanyahu's spokesman stated in response that "Hamas is attempting to fool the world but it will not succeed."'[8] On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority, which is largely dominated by Fatah, has renounced the armed struggle and advocates a two-state solution.

The rift between the Gaza Strip, governed by Hamas, and the West Bank, under the Palestinian Authority since 2007, preserves the diplomatic paralysis by ensuring that there is no established government with which to negotiate. For a long time, continuing such divisions seems to have provided Israel with a convenient excuse not to negotiate with the Palestinians to end the conflict.

From the moment the Israeli government adopted the Oslo Accords, the Israeli right was livid and utterly opposed to the agreement. And so was Hamas. Both attempted to break it. The most prescient comment I heard after it was signed was that the recognition by Israel of the PLO and the signing of the Oslo Accords came at least a decade too late.

Itamar Ben Gvir, who was then a leading activist on the far right, later said, 'We knew Rabin was dangerous; it was obvious he'd taken a turn to the left.' Yehudit Katzover, the co-head of Women in Green, a settlers' organisation, said it was a great surprise because 'we hadn't been worried. Labour's ideology had been pretty compatible with Gush Emunim … It was a total ideological breaking of all the rules. It wasn't like Rabin.'[9] On 4 November 1995 Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a right-wing extremist who opposed the signing of the Oslo Accords.

As for Hamas, it considered the essence of the peace accords as coercion of the Palestinians, being the weaker party, by Israel, the stronger party. The organisation criticised the PLO and its leadership for selling out the Palestinian cause in exchange for millions of dollars.

Another significant outcome of the Oslo deal was that it put on ice the work of many activists around the world who were engaged in furthering the cause of justice in Israel/Palestine. These included American Zionists who wanted to bring an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Here is how one of them, the American journalist and activist Peter Beinart, described what happened:

> My generation, which came of age in the 1990s, didn't build a single organization that challenged the American Jewish establishment on Israel. That's partly because, during the Oslo era, we thought American, Israeli and Palestinian leaders would create a two-state solution on their own. But it's also because the 1990s were a lost decade for the American activist left.[10]

It would have been possible, as it still is now, for Israel and the Palestinians to stress the times in the past when Jews and Arabs lived together in peace, whether in Palestine itself throughout the ages or in Andalusia in Spain from the tenth to the twelfth century. But when the 'world' tried to play a role to further Jewish– Arab relations after the signing of the Oslo Accords, it acted with a cynicism that served Israeli purposes. I will give one example: a UNESCO conference held in Granada on 8 December 1993, called 'Peace the Day After', which I attended.

The purpose of the meeting, however, was not for Israelis and Palestinians, together with various people from the region, to come up with programmes for the post-peace culture. It was instead to give legitimacy to what was already happening, without any questions asked. It was all meticulously staged – the participants just had to be docile.

In the first session I asked how it was possible to speak of peace before even the basic components of peace had been put in place. We Palestinians were still under occupation and the occupiers were pursuing a deliberate policy of settling its own population in the occupied areas. After I spoke, a professor from Tel Aviv University expressed his distress at my inability to look forward. He said that he had been disappointed when he heard me

speak about the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Sinai after the 1967 war. Palestinians, he went on, were always speaking of the past. ‘We Israelis can also speak of the past. We can look back at 3,000 years of history,’ he said. Another scholar took offence at my use of the words ‘occupied territories’, because it assumed that there was an occupation, just as there had been in France by the Germans. This, he said, was a lie.

There was more futile discussion. Then a tense silence as Israel’s foreign minister, Shimon Peres, entered the hall. He did not utter a single word and stayed for exactly four minutes before leaving to catch a plane. I wondered why he had come at all, but then I realised it was in order to allow the list of attendees to say they had met him, along with dignitaries and thinkers from the Arab world. The meeting was a charade. We were given no chance to present our ideas for future cultural projects. The objective was purely political.

Among the few writers who refused to come to the conference was the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In response, the cultural adviser to Shimon Peres said, ‘When Makhmoud [which is how she pronounced his name] Darwish left Israel to join the PLO I wrote him a letter. Last night I went over the letter and wrote to him this addendum which I want to read to you: “Where are you, Makhmoud Darwish? Why have you not come to this conference? Now that there is peace and the two sides are getting together, where are you, Makhmoud Darwish?”’ Her words echoed in my ears long after the event.

The great poet proved to be more astute than all of us in staying away despite the tremendous pressure that the PLO must have put on him to attend.

*

I have shown why the end of apartheid in South Africa did not inspire the Israelis to end the similar policies they were pursuing in the Occupied Territories. Now I come to the second question: why did the world not put pressure on Israel to advance peace?

The international conference which was convened in Madrid to kick-start the negotiations that ended with the disappointing Oslo Accords did not constitute a genuine international effort to end the occupation. The

USA, which arranged the terms of the bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, imposed such narrow parameters that those negotiations were unlikely to bring about an end to the occupation or the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Occupied Territories. They did so by confining the terms of reference to ‘interim self-government arrangements’. This meant that the negotiations could avoid terms related to the ending of all measures of annexation and appropriation and the removal of settlements. The USA had no appreciation of what was necessary to ensure that peace was made between Israelis and Palestinians.

Three decades after the signing of the Oslo Accords how can the post-Madrid situation be described?

Following more than fifty years of assiduous Israeli attempts to impress upon the world that its status in the Occupied Territories is not that of an occupier but the fulfilment of the wish of the Almighty, the world continues to refer to it by its right name, occupation, as the testimony of many of the nations at the February 2024 International Court of Justice (ICJ) hearings on the legality of the occupation shows. This covers all the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including eastern Jerusalem, whose annexation to Israel is not recognised. The Israeli settlements in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem continue to be referred to as illegal.

In the late 1970s Menachem Begin sought to attract suburban settlers to create a strong lobby that would prevent any future political solution based on territorial compromise. The decline of the left in Israel and the extensive Israeli settlements, made possible by a massive influx of funds from the USA, has now produced an electoral bloc of settlers who would make it politically impossible (as Begin had predicted as early as 1980) for any Israeli government to withdraw from the Occupied Territories. And yet unless Israel does so the country will move further to the right. It will be transformed into an openly fascist, racist state and eventually, if it does not want to continue to be accused of running an apartheid regime, will be forced to do what the whites in South Africa have done and give the vote to all those living in the area of Greater Israel/geographic Palestine. In this way a single democratic secular (not a Jewish) state might be established in Israel/Palestine.

At present the relationship of Israel to the Palestinian territories is more akin to colonialism than occupation. Occupation is a situation of temporary, militarised control, external to the state’s sovereign borders. Control of

Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories is civilian, permanent (according to the statements of Israel's leaders) and internal to Israeli society and politics. Over 600,000 Israeli citizens live in the West Bank (including Jerusalem beyond the Green Line), all of them subject to Israeli law. Israel controls entry and exit, customs and taxes, tourism, trade and even registering births and deaths in the territories.

Within the West Bank two communities, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, live side by side, subject to different laws and legal systems. The impressive economic prosperity of Israel has poured enormous resources mainly into the Jewish population on both sides of the Green Line. This has exacerbated the process of 'separate development' that characterises apartheid regimes. These processes caused the creation of different types of citizenship, which again remind one of South Africa in the past: Jews between the River Jordan and the sea are 'white' citizens, Arabs in Israel have 'coloured' (in other words, partial) citizenship and Palestinians in the territories have 'black' citizenship, without political rights.

The city of Hebron is a case in point. When I first heard in the early 1980s about plans to connect the Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba with the Old City of Hebron, I thought it was a pipe dream that would be impossible to realise. However, Israel seems to have achieved it. Then I thought the 850 Israeli settlers would have to live in a ghetto in the Old City of Hebron, surrounded by over 216,000 Palestinians who were living there. Now I know that the plan Israel implemented included connecting their settlements together to Jerusalem through the longest tunnel in the country, which goes under the Palestinian city of Beit Jala. In this way the Israeli land use plan has created enclaves out of Arab Hebron and other Palestinian cities and villages. It is now the Palestinians who are living in enclaves, separated from each other by walls and checkpoints, whereas the Israeli settlements are connected by a network of multi-lane highways that were planned as early as 1984, when Road Plan number 50 was published, a comprehensive road plan that replaced the existing road layout of the West Bank.

Whereas temporary military occupation can be justified as essential and even legal, colonialism and apartheid are illegal and undemocratic. Yet rather than bringing this situation to an end, the Oslo Accords only entrenched it. After more than fifty years the world community has remained tolerant of the Israeli violation of international law and has never

imposed sanctions on the country, as it has in a number of other countries when they violated the international humanitarian law.

This was how the psychiatrist Eyad Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, described the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank:

Among other thing, it means:

- an identity number and permit to live as a resident which will be lost if one leaves the country for more than three months;
- a travelling document which specifies that the holder is of an undefined nationality;
- being called twice a year by intelligence for routine investigation and persuasion to work as an informer on ‘your brothers and sister’;
- leaving your home in the refugee camp in Gaza at 3 a.m., going through roadblocks and checkpoints to do the work that others won’t and returning home in the evening to collapse in bed for few hours before getting up for the following day;
- losing respect from one’s own children when they see their father spat at and beaten before their own eyes;
- seeing the (name of the) Prophet being spat on by Israeli settlers in Hebron.

He ended by saying: ‘We were exhausted, tormented and brutalised.’[11]

I will never forget an image from the 2004 Dutch–Israeli documentary film *Arna’s Children* of a young boy, Ala, sitting on the ruins of his home in the Jenin refugee camp after it was blown up by the Israeli army, his round face full of repressed anger. That film, directed by the late Juliano Mer Khamis and Danniel Danniel, is about a children’s theatre group in Jenin established by Juliano’s Israeli mother. It followed the life of Ala and his colleagues from when they were children to the time they became fighters. It was a revelation to me, helping me understand the experience and development of men so different from myself and their militant reaction to the Israeli occupation that was so contrary to mine. Ala continued to fight until he was killed.

Over the years, as I have watched Israeli military operations against Gaza and seen Palestinian fighters stand up to the strongest army in the Middle East in a way no other Arab army has done since 1973, I think of that film and those testimonies.

But again my question: why was Israel so unprepared for peace? Why did it not use the opportunity of negotiations with the PLO to arrive at a real peace with its neighbours, who at that time were willing to make peace?

After Israel's victory in the 1967 war, the Israeli minister of defence, Moshe Dayan, declared, 'We are now an empire.' It appears that Israeli leaders have never ceased to believe this. As an empire with military might, the country felt confident that it would hold on to all the territories occupied in 1967. Rather than use the Oslo negotiations to make real peace with its enemy, the PLO, Israel prepared and managed to get its adversary to sign a surrender document. The PLO on its part was ill-prepared for the negotiations, was feeling vulnerable because of its rival Hamas and was determined to re-establish itself in Palestine whatever the cost.

But this was not the only reason why Israel was not willing, and remains unwilling, to make peace. Real peace would mean a reconfiguration of the myth on which the Israeli state was established and possibly huge compensation for the dispossessed Palestinians. And, of course, sharing the land with them.

There is another reason, one similar to those that keep other military powers on a war footing: the financial interests of the weapon producers. Israel is a major exporter of defence products. Its perpetual war footing serves the commercial interests of powerful manufacturers in Israel, who can claim that the weapons they offer have been proved to be effective. Four months into the Gaza war, the Israeli army, according to the Israeli magazine *972*, is 'once again marketing itself as a high-tech superpower, talking up the automated weaponry and supercomputer surveillance tech being "battle-tested" in its war on Gaza'.[12] It also perpetuates the fear that acts as a glue, holding together the various contradictory strands of Israeli society. This was made abundantly clear during the war on Gaza, when the Israeli population were suddenly largely united, after they had been severely divided over the question of the constitutional changes proposed by Netanyahu's government.

Yet another reason why Israel was not prepared for peace was the rise of a messianic trend in Israel with adherents believing that the land is their God-given patrimony and as such may not be relinquished.

In this, Israel is different from apartheid South Africa. Where in South Africa the master race was homogeneous, in Israel it is polarised, politically, religiously, economically and socially. That is why, without the fear of a common external enemy, the likelihood is that the collapse of the state will come not just from outside pressure but also from inside.

On 30 August 2016 Tamir Pardo, the former Mossad (Israel's external security service) chief, proposed that the greatest danger facing Israel wasn't external but rather the divisions within Israeli society. Speaking at a press conference ahead of an event to commemorate fallen Druze soldiers, he said, 'If a divided society crosses a certain threshold, you can reach phenomena such as civil war in extreme cases.' He then added that the distance between the situation in Israel and a civil war was growing smaller: 'I'm afraid we're [moving] in that direction.'[13] What he didn't say was that fear of a common enemy is what serves to fend off the possibility of a civil war, at least for the time being.

Uri Avneri, the veteran journalist and former member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament), then suggested that what Pardo meant was that the rift is between European Ashkenazi Jews and Oriental Mizrahi Jews. He wrote:

> What makes this rift so potentially dangerous, and explains Pardo's dire warning, is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Orientals are 'rightist', nationalist and at least mildly religious, while the majority of the Ashkenazim are 'leftist', more peace-oriented and secular. Since the Ashkenazim are also in general socially and economically better situated than the Orientals, the rift is profound …
>
> A lot of Israelis have begun to talk of 'two Jewish societies' in Israel, some even talk about 'two Jewish peoples' within the Israeli Jewish nation. What holds them together? The conflict, of course. The occupation. The perpetual state of war …
>
> It is not that the Israeli–Arab conflict has been forced on Israel. Rather, it's the other way around: Israel keeps up the conflict, because it needs the conflict for its very existence.[14]

On 24 March 2016 twenty-one-year-old Abdel Fattah al-Sharif, from the occupied Old City of Hebron, lay on the ground, shot after he allegedly tried to stab an Israeli soldier. Eighteen-year-old Sergeant Elor Azaria, from the mixed Palestinian–Israeli city of Ramle, arrived at the scene. A member of the Israeli army's medical corps, instead of administering first aid to the bleeding Palestinian on the ground, he cocked his rifle and shot him point-blank in the head.

I looked at a photograph of al-Sharif's body covered with a black cloth, the blood pooling under him, while soldiers and settlers milled around unconcerned. I could not bring myself to watch the video taken by a brave Palestinian. Yet ever since this killing took place, I have not been able to stop thinking about the twisted ideology that turned a young man into someone capable of killing a wounded man only a few years older than himself. His words: 'This terrorist must die.' What brutality and fear had blunted his humanity to the degree where he had shown no compassion or hesitation. After the killing he was so unrattled that he had the wherewithal to send a text message to his father informing him of his action.

I kept looking at this young Israeli man's face, searching for clues. His large black eyes had an inquisitive look but there was a superiority, an arrogance, an imperviousness to his expression. From the way his family hugged him, there was no indication that they had any doubt about the morality of their son's action, sparing no thought for the parents of the murdered young man, his family or friends. Nor did the majority of the Israeli public, who considered him a hero. Thousands took to the streets to demonstrate on his behalf. Sixty per cent of young people expressed their belief that he did the right thing by killing the Palestinian. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called his family to express his support. Who, then, would help this young soldier regain his humanity? What would it take to rehumanise the tens of thousands of desensitised Israelis like him?

The decision to prosecute Azaria, his subsequent conviction for manslaughter and his incarceration for eighteen months – later reduced to four – rocked Israeli society, reflecting deep fissures on powerful issues.

Elor Azaria, who came from a low-income Mizrahi family, was an open supporter of the explicitly fascist and racist Kahanist movement. After the murder he was celebrated and was called by the right 'our son, our hero'. By his adoption, a segment of the population was seizing a moment to attack the left, the media, the judiciary and the chief of staff. On 19 April

2016 two thousand people demonstrated in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv in support of Azaria. The crowds chanted incitement against the IDF chief of staff Gadi Eizenkot, 'Gadi, Gadi, be careful. Rabin is looking for a friend' – a reference to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

In a comment in *972*, Edo Konrad wrote on 4 January 2017:

> Azaria's staggering, near-total support among the Jewish Israeli public is a sign that this demographic shift has wide-ranging social repercussions. Many viewed the outrage over the mere fact that Azaria was even put on trial as a revolt against the old military elites. The rise of a new class of politicians such as Miri Regev, who views herself as the torch-bearer of the Mizrahi struggle, means that the army of the periphery will only grow more emboldened. The rift between the old military and judicial elites on the one hand, and a periphery historically scorned by the liberal elites and now supported by the far right, will only deepen. And in turn, so will the control over millions of Palestinians.[15]

Yet irrespective of this shift to the far right, how to explain on the human level this total dehumanisation, that a wounded Palestinian who posed no danger could be shot by a medic?

According to the Israeli columnist Yossi Klein:

> Being raised on a certain image of the Arab did something to us. Today it is hard to find Arabic speakers in Israel who are not Arabs or who were not born in a Muslim country. Ninety per cent of the Arabs in Israel speak Hebrew, while only 3 per cent of Israeli-born Jews speak Arabic. Last year only some 2,000 Jewish high-school students took the matriculation exam in the language of 20 per cent of their country's residents. The teenagers who took that test in Arabic did not see it as a bridge. They saw it as a weapon, and most of them, presumably, were inducted into Unit 8200.[16]

Unit 8200 is an Israeli intelligence corps unit that was established in 1952 for collecting signals intelligence and code decryption. It should be pointed out that the languages of the two sides, Arabic and Hebrew, are very similar. A number of Arabic words have become commonly used by

Hebrew speakers, such as *ahlan*, a popular greeting like hello in English, and *walla*, meaning ‘by Allah, by God’. Fewer Hebrew words are used by Arabic speakers. With the exception of *yom yom*, meaning ‘daily’, and *ramzon* for ‘traffic lights’, most of the Hebrew words that entered daily parlance have a military or security connotation, such as *makhsom* for ‘checkpoint’, which is given the Arabic plural form *makhaseem*, and *makhsheer* for ‘walkie-talkie’.

Often Arabic words are turned into curse words in Hebrew: *shababnikkim* is pejorative Hebrew slang for right-wing extremist youth from ultra-Orthodox homes who are on the fringes of Orthodox society. They are often yeshiva dropouts who have picked up some of the anti-Arab views that can be found even in certain rabbinical writings. The word is rooted in the Arabic *shabab*, which means ‘the youth’. In Israeli society the word is associated with stone-throwing hooligans. In the various institutions that teach Hebrew to new immigrants the accent taught is European not Middle Eastern. This helps define the difference between Hebrew speakers who are Arab from the non-Arabs. At checkpoints and the airport if the guard is unsure he engages the passenger in conversation to find out from his accent whether or not he is Arab in order to apply the harsher rules for treating Arabs in such places.

Perhaps the most cynical and convoluted exploitation of these similarities in looks and language is when they are used by Israeli operatives, called *must’arab’een* (Arabised, or acting or pretending to be Arabs), who mingle with Palestinians to identify and arrest or kill activists. When soldiers masquerading as Arabs were attacked by settlers in the southern part of the West Bank, near the village of Susia, politicians in Israel criticised the army’s use of these look-alikes and excused the actions of the settlers because when they attacked the soldiers they ‘believed they were terrorists’.

On 26 August 2014 members of the Knesset from the Israeli parties Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud and Jewish Home submitted a bill to rescind the status of Arabic as an official language in Israel. They did this in the name of greater ‘social cohesion’ in the country. Later, with the passing of the Jewish State Law on 19 July 2018, the Arabic language ceased to be an official language in Israel. In September 2014 Israel’s Population, Immigration and Borders Authority released its annual statement for the Jewish New Year, which included a list of the most popular baby names in

Israel. Whereas in fact Mohammad, an Arab name, topped the list, the official list hid this fact and claimed that most popular were the Jewish names Yosef, Daniel and Uri.

Sometimes the condemnation of Palestinian literature reaches absurd heights. The popular poem ‘Write I am an Arab’ by Mahmoud Darwish had been read on Israel Army Radio as part of a series on formative Israeli texts in the ‘University on Air’ programme. The Israeli defence minister at the time, Avigdor Lieberman, compared this to the ‘glorification of the literary marvels of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*’. He added that the station’s main role was to ‘strengthen social solidarity and not to widen social rifts’.

In the midst of one of Israel’s earlier devastating onslaughts on Gaza, Operation Cast Lead of 2008–9, Eyad Sarraj wrote: ‘Brute force and carnage in Gaza on the scale of today is a dangerous omen. Israel must restrain its military might and face up to the consequences of dragging the region into such a serious and intensified path of violence. Palestinians must stop all forms of violence and unite in the pursuit of peace and justice.’ We have already noted how concerned he was about the brutalisation that happens to children who see their fathers spat at and beaten before their eyes. And so much worse has happened since.

An Israeli soldier serving in Hebron, Eran Efrati, was asked to map the interior of the house of one of the Palestinian residents in the Old City and therefore experienced the effect of the harsh treatment meted out to the Palestinians. When he objected, his officer said, ‘We’ve been doing mapping every night, three or four houses a night for forty years. If we go into their houses all the time, if you arrest people all the time, if they feel terrified all the time, they will never attack us. They will only feel chased after.’

This is just one example of the long-established policy of engendering fear that the Israeli occupation practises against the Palestinians. In 2002 Moshe Ya’alon, then chief of staff, said that the Israeli military was attempting to ‘etch the consciousness of the Palestinians’ in accordance with the ‘map of pain’ drawn up by the Israeli army’s general staff.[17]

When I heard this I remembered that this attempt at ‘etching our consciousness’ was not the first. There had been an earlier one by Ariel Sharon, who, as I reported in my 2008 book *Palestinian Walks*, tried ‘to etch in the consciousness of the Palestinians a new geography’ of Palestine.

It seems that the Israelis are always trying to etch things into the Palestinian consciousness, and failing.

There have been three other attacks on Gaza since the 2008 Operation Cast Lead, during which over 1,300 Palestinians were killed. Operation Protective Edge lasted from 8 July to 26 August 2014 and over 2,300 Palestinians were killed. It was followed by Israeli air raids in May 2021 which Israel said were in response to rockets fired from Gaza. In the fighting that went on for eleven days, at least 260 people were killed in Gaza and thirteen died in Israel. Then in August 2022 more than thirty Palestinians, including women and children, were killed in attacks carried out by Israeli planes. However, the most telling prelude to that most unspeakable war on Gaza of 2023–4 was Operation Protective Edge of 2014, which lasted for fifty days.

In the course of the 2014 war Israel tried to avoid criticism for its aerial attacks on civilian structures by claiming to have sent a warning to civilians of the impending attacks. Yet the severity and barbarity of the war waged against Gaza, an open-air prison where there is nowhere to run to or hide, could not be concealed by linguistic tricks. One such trick was what the Israeli army morbidly called ‘roof knocking’, whereby a rocket was fired to warn residents that their building was about to be targeted.

In an attempt to avoid recriminations for causing the deaths of so many civilians in the course of its 2014 attack on Gaza, Israel first sent telephone messages to warn more than 100,000 residents in two Gaza City neighbourhoods to evacuate their homes.[18] This blanket warning was then followed by a call to occupants telling them to ‘get out, you have five minutes before the rocket comes’. Then came the ‘roof knocking’ to let them know that the army was serious. As Al Jazeera showed, the army did not wait for five minutes but fired the bombs earlier, even when five minutes are not long enough for an entire family, especially those with young children, to evacuate their home.

In addition to this Orwellian language, the 2014 Gaza assault and the reporting of events were replete with misleading terms. The obfuscation began with the official Hebrew name Israel gave its attack, which translated literally as ‘resolute cliff’. As Steven Poole of the *Guardian* pointed out, this was meant ‘to assure its victims of the futility of resistance. Only a fool would try to fight a cliff.’ In English the name used was Operation

Protective Edge. As an Israeli military spokesman explained, this was chosen to 'give a more defensive connotation'. Poole added, 'The bombing was supposedly "protective", though not of those bombed.' Rarely was the fighting referred to by Israel as a war; it was a 'clash' or a 'conflict'. Israeli fighters were referred to as 'soldiers', Hamas as 'terrorists' who had built 'terror tunnels'. As in the present assault on Gaza, the then Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, claimed that Hamas had turned UN facilities into 'terrorist hotspots'. Poole commented, 'A terrorist hotspot is rather like a Wi-Fi hotspot: when you are within range, you can be sure of getting a terrorist. Of course, if your means of getting him is a large bomb, you will certainly get a bunch of other people too.'[19]

Idan Barir, an artillery captain from Israel, compared the use of artillery to Russian roulette:

> Artillery fire … is the absolute opposite of precise sniper fire … [it] is nothing but a large fragmentation grenade which is meant to kill everyone within a 60-metre radius … they are not meant to hit specific targets … since the launch of Operation Protective Edge, the IDF has already shot thousands of artillery shells at different parts of the Gaza Strip. The shells have caused unbearable damage to human life and tremendous destruction to infrastructure …[20]

Whatever the attempt at changing the perception of the terrible reality, whether by language or manipulation of the media, the loss of life and extent of the destruction caused in Gaza during that war were horrific. In the course of the fifty days of fighting in 2014, Israel dropped 20,000 tons of explosives on an area of 365 square kilometres, killing 2,251 Palestinians.[21] Yet much worse was to come a decade later.

Following the 2014 war, the journalist Uri Avneri pointed out that it was as though there were two wars being fought:

> The Israeli media are now totally subservient. There is no independent reporting. 'Military correspondents' are not allowed into Gaza to see for themselves … I escape from this brainwashing by listening to both sides, switching all the time between Israeli TV stations and Aljazeera (in Arabic and in English). What I see is two

> different wars, happening at the same time on two different planets …

In a telling comment in the aftermath of the 2014 war, the much-lauded man of peace and former Israeli president, Shimon Peres, who during his tenure as prime minister of Israel built more settlements than any other Israeli leader and was instrumental in arming Israel with nuclear weapons, said in an interview with the BBC: 'The extensive Hamas rocket fire from Gaza over the past month has made it difficult to justify withdrawing from the West Bank as part of a future peace deal with the Palestinians.'

Repeating the lie often used by Israeli propagandists to deny that Israel put Gaza under siege, Peres added,

> Look, we left Gaza willingly, unilaterally. We handed over to the Palestinians a free, open Gaza. Which is a beautiful strip of a beautiful beach. They could have developed it for tourism, for fishing, for agriculture. We don't understand, frankly, why are they fighting? What are they shooting? What are the reasons? We left. What is the purpose? They want to be free? They are free.[22]

Not only had Israel placed the Gaza Strip under siege for sixteen years, but it also prohibited the Palestinians from exploiting the large field of natural gas off the coast of Gaza that was discovered in 2000 by British Gas. It is estimated that the Strip has $4 billion worth of natural gas reserves off its shores, which could have saved the Gaza economy.

To dispel any residue of hope, even before the 2014 war had ended the Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, exercising to the full the pessimism of the intellect, wrote:

> We still haven't reached an agreement, yet that agreement is already behind us. This is what the masses clamoured for in the biggest protest during the war – for quiet for the south. Quiet. Simply quiet. Who could be for and against quiet? This must be Israelis' most self-righteous and revolting demand. They want quiet and to hell with the surrounding noise and its causes. Let Gaza suffocate and the West Bank.[23]

The Gaza Strip remained under blockade. It is a little-known fact that Gaza was once a happy place with a happy people who had a great sense of humour and led lives like other seafaring people. But this was many decades ago. Even prior to the 2014 war, Gaza had a high incidence of suicide and a substantial number of people living on drugs.

It is unprecedented that a whole society be placed under siege for so long, an open-ended siege with no end in sight. After the 2014 war people were heard saying, 'Life in Gaza has always been consumed by war. I never knew it to be otherwise.' The new generation had forgotten that there was once a different life in the Strip.

Speaking to BFM TV in the wake of the January 2015 attacks in France that killed seventeen people the former French prime minister Dominique de Villepin, who had led the opposition to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, described the Islamic State as the 'deformed child' of western policy. He wrote in *Le Monde* that the West's wars in the Muslim world 'nourish terrorism among us with promises of eradicating it'. His analysis was astute, as was his warning against simplifying these conflicts in the Middle East by 'seeing only the Islamist symptom'.

With the current war taking place in Gaza, I thought again of these words and how they applied to Israeli myopia. The effect is not confined to the Middle East. Israeli practices against Palestinians and the flouting of respect for international law have had an effect far beyond the region. In the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester talked about the 'Overton Window … a term from political science meaning the acceptable range of political thought in a culture at a given moment':

> It was the creation of Joseph Overton, a think-tank intellectual based in Michigan … His crucial insight, one which both emerged from and was central to the work of the think-tank right, was that the window of acceptability can be moved. An idea can start far outside the political mainstream – flat taxes, abolish the IRS, more guns in schools, building a beautiful wall and making Mexico pay – but once it has been stated and argued for, framed and restated, it becomes thinkable. It crosses over from the fringe of right-wing think-tankery to journalistic fellow-travellers; then it crosses over to the fringe of electoral politics; then it becomes a thing people start seriously

> advocating as a possible policy. The window has moved, and rough beasts come slouching through it to be born.[24]

Even before the 2014 war was over, there were those who assured the Israeli public that this would not be the last war; it was but a forerunner of the next more destructive one. The Israeli historian Benny Morris wrote:

> What should we do next time? The answer is clear and well known. All that's needed is the courage to start down this path and the determination to finish the job. It won't be either easy or quick. We're talking about reoccupying the entire Gaza Strip and destroying Hamas as a military organisation, and perhaps also as a political one.
>
> This will require months of combat, during which the Strip will be cleansed, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, of Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives and armaments. It will exact a serious price in lives from both Israel Defense Forces soldiers and Palestinian civilians. But that's the price required of a nation like ours, which wants to live on its own land in a neighbourhood like ours …[25]

As far as Netanyahu was concerned, there was only one solution for the conflict with the Palestinians and it wasn't to make peace. To avoid negotiations with the Palestinians and to ensure that they were kept divided, his government followed a policy of 'managing the occupation' and ensuring that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which under the Oslo Agreement were to constitute one integral unit, remained separate. This gave the Israeli government the excuse not to negotiate with the Palestinians, saying that they did not have a unified leadership. To ensure both aims, in 2018 Netanyahu allowed Qatar to make monthly payments of $15 million in cash-filled suitcases to the Gaza Strip. Hamas used some of this money to train for the war with Israel and build a network of tunnels that spread throughout the Strip.

In February 2016, on a visit to a construction site, Netanyahu said,

> At the end, in the state of Israel, as I see it, there will be a fence that spans it all. I'll be told, "this is what you want, to protect the villa?" The answer is yes. Will we surround all of the state of Israel with fences and barriers? The answer is yes. In the area that we live in, we must defend ourselves against the wild beasts.

By the ‘state of Israel’ Netanyahu meant all of Greater Israel, including the Occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And so Israel built a sixty-five-kilometre-long barrier at a cost of $1.11 billion, stretching the entire border between Israel and the Gaza Strip. The uselessness of fences and barriers was perfectly revealed on 7 October 2023, when Hamas broke through the barrier – the barrier that was not enough to prevent ‘the wild beasts’ from attacking. And yet this message has not been heard.

That event shook Israeli Jews and led to the current Gaza war, whose double aim, according to Israel, was to achieve total victory over Hamas and bring back the 250 Israeli hostages that Hamas had captured.

Prior to the current Gaza war, Israeli society was more divided than ever. There had been a ten-month stand-off between Israel’s new hardline government and the large protest movement opposed to the government’s ‘judicial reforms’, which would give politicians much greater control of the judiciary and in particular the High Court. Another warning of an impending civil war came from the Israeli president, Isaac Herzog. On 15 March 2023 he revealed in a televised address to the nation, ‘The last few weeks have been tearing us apart. Israel is in the throes of a profound crisis. Anyone who thinks that a real civil war, of human life, is a line that we will not reach has no idea. The abyss is within touching distance.’[26]

As soon as the war in Gaza started, however, the Israeli nation came together. And as the war brought the Israelis together, so the ensuing catastrophe for the civilians of Gaza began. Just as the apartheid regime in South Africa became more fierce in its final years, a similar increase in violence has characterised the behaviour of the Israeli regime, army and settlers today, especially in the Gaza Strip but also in relation to civilians in the West Bank.

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PART TWO

THE GAZA WAR, 2023–4

I have shown why the end of apartheid in South Africa did not inspire Israel to bring an end to similar policies it was entrenching in the Occupied Territories. I have also asked why the world did not put pressure on Israel to advance the peace process. Now I want to ask what role the Gaza war has played – if any – in bringing about the beginning of a global shift.

When the 7 October events that led to the war took place I was not surprised. The siege of Gaza and its 2 million Palestinians seemed interminable. The 4,499 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails were experiencing more depletion of their few, hard-won rights after the right-wing politician Itamar Ben Gvir had taken over as minister of national security. In addition, Israel was violating with impunity the status quo at Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam. There were persistent efforts by the fanatic Israelis of the Temple Mount Faithful to carry out their rituals at the site, supported again by Ben Gvir. It seemed there was nothing left sacred for the Palestinians. And Israel clearly had no plan to end the Gaza siege. The present government had made it clear that Israel claimed all of geographic Palestine as its own. It was no longer offering Palestinians a promise for future resolution of the conflict.

Israelis should have known that violence would erupt when people are bereft of hope. Yet the Israeli government dismissed the possibility that a reaction was to be anticipated and deployed the Israeli army which had been stationed in the south to the West Bank in order to protect settlers as they celebrated the holiday of Sukkot and went on their rampages against Palestinian villages. I had anticipated that the rising tensions would eventually lead to a major conflict. However, I hadn’t expected it to be much different from previous wars. How wrong I was!

I should have gathered what was to come from the pronouncements of the government at the start of the war, when it said it would impose a

‘complete’ siege on the enclave. ‘There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed,’ declared defence minister Yoav Gallant. And shortly after the Hamas attack, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he would destroy Hamas and ‘turn Gaza into a deserted island. And we will target each and every corner of the Strip.’ But I still reasoned that political leaders usually speak with such bravado as part of war propaganda to weaken the enemy psychologically. Yet as the war progressed I could see that they meant every word and did not care about civilians, including children. In their eyes, as well as the eyes of most Israelis, all Gazans were guilty.

This war was different from any of the previous wars Israel had waged against Hamas in Gaza or against Palestinians in the West Bank. In the 2006 general elections in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Hamas had been elected to the Palestinian parliament established under the Oslo Accords. By June 2007 its fighters had taken control of the Gaza Strip and killed rival Fatah officials. The Palestinian Territory was divided. I do not believe that Israel wants to destroy only Hamas, as it claims. Hamas has been the cornerstone of Israeli politics for a long time. When Netanyahu took office for a second time in 2009, he pursued a policy of strengthening Hamas at the expense of the Palestinian Authority, allowing Qatar to transfer nearly a billion dollars to Gaza. By keeping this division and preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Israeli government has been able to say that there is no unified Palestinian leadership to negotiate with.

As Tareq Baconi has argued, calling Hamas a terrorist organisation has been ‘a powerful device to undermine any legitimacy that organisation … may have’. Also by labelling it as such and lobbying for the USA to do the same, Israel made sure that Hamas could not participate in global politics. Baconi went on: ‘Hamas’s government became the body responsible for administering the civil and social affairs of the Palestinian inhabitants within the Gaza Strip. In essence, Hamas’s government became a de facto administrative authority operating under the guidance of the movement, which did not get involved in the daily affairs of governance.’[1]

The Hamas attack of 7 October was well planned and its success was comparable only to the Egyptian surprise attack that launched the October 1973 war. Hamas militants not only breached the barrier but also killed some 1,200 soldiers and civilians and took some 250 captives, significantly complicating the course of the ensuing war for Israel. The brutality of

Hamas's attack and the civilian death toll certainly cast a dark shadow on their military success. Whereas an occupied population has the right under international law to resist, they have no right to commit war crimes. Still, this time the Palestinians did not fit into the role of victims. To the Israelis they seemed like aggressors who were challenging Israel's very existence.

Up to that point Netanyahu's strategy of managing the occupation appeared to Israelis to be working. In the West Bank the rate of settlement building was higher than ever and Saudi Arabia was close to normalising relations with Israel in accordance with the Abraham Accords. These were bilateral agreements on normalisation facilitated by the USA and signed on 15 September 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Except for the occasional rocket fired from Gaza, to which Israel retaliated by making Gazans pay a heavy price, Palestinians in Gaza seemed safely imprisoned behind the barrier built with great sophistication and at great expense. Young Israelis felt secure enough that they planned a rave right on the border with Gaza. But when Hamas broke through, Israel's vulnerability and insecurity were exposed. Israelis were traumatised because they realised they couldn't go on with their life in the same way, making the same assumptions about the reality of their state and its security. Unless, that is, they defeated the aggressor. And so most of the population rallied behind Netanyahu's leadership and the goal he set for the war: total victory against Hamas. To them everything seemed justified in pursuit of that goal.

With around 2.1 million Palestinians in approximately 365 square kilometres (141 square miles) of land, Gaza has one of the highest population densities in the world. More than 70 per cent of Gaza's population are refugees or descendants of refugees who fled or were forced out of villages in the south of what is now Israel. Nearly half of the population are under the age of eighteen. At the time of writing the Israeli army had killed 30,000 Palestinians, around two thirds of them women and children, and wounded 72,158. According to UN officials, the war has driven around 80 per cent of the Palestinians in Gaza from their homes.

By 20 February 2024, according to Global Nutrition Cluster (GNC), an aid partnership led by the UN's children's agency, UNICEF, more than 90 per cent of children under five in Gaza eat two or fewer food groups a day, known as severe food poverty. A similar percentage were affected by

infectious diseases, with 70 per cent experiencing diarrhoea in the last two weeks. Another word for this is starvation.

About 70 per cent of the Gaza Strip's civilian facilities and infrastructure have been destroyed. This war is by far the most devastating Israel has ever waged on Gaza.

On 20 February 2024 the IDF chief of staff, Herzl Halevi, said to army officers, 'Unlike our enemy, we maintain our humanity. We must be careful not to use force where it is not required, to distinguish between terrorist and non-terrorist … we are not on a killing spree, revenge or genocide …'

But the destruction went beyond killing and wounding. According to a 2 February 2024 press report, UNESCO has verified damage to twenty-two sites since 7 October 2023. These are Anthedon Harbour, Ibn Othman Mosque, Rashad Ash-Shawwa Cultural Centre, the Great Omari Mosque, Dar AsSa'ada Dome and Manuscript Centre, Pasha Palace, Zofor Domri Mosque, AsSaqqa Palace, Subat Al Alami, Al-Qissariya Market, the Commonwealth Gaza War Cemetery, Hamam As Samra, Khader Tarazi House, Al Mathaf Hotel (movable heritage repository), the storage facility of movable cultural objects at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities at Sheikh Radwan, the Roman cemetery of Gaza, the Ghussein House, the St Porphyrios Orthodox Church Complex, Sabil Ar Rifaiya (Ar Rifaiya Fountain) and HatHat House in Gaza City, plus two sites outside the city, the Old Al Omari Mosque in Jabalia (North Gaza Governorate) and the archaeological site of Tell Rafah in Rafah Governorate, near the border with Egypt.[2]

Commenting on the destruction, Raphael Greenberg and Alon Arad wrote:

> the destruction of these sites is part of the battle over perception and memory. We Israelis seem to believe that the land belongs to whoever controls its past; if we deny the Palestinians their memory of the past, we can also deny their attachment to the land and thus pave the way for their expulsion. This is not a new idea.[3]

Israel also blew up Gaza's last standing university, Al-Israa University, and in the past four months all or parts of Gaza's twelve universities have been bombed and mostly destroyed, and a number of faculty members have

been killed, including the president of the Islamic University. Poets, writers and artists have also perished. No one is safe.

Not only did the Israeli army destroy Palestinian homes, they also looted them. As political scientist Yagil Levy has written:

> The looting is a symbol of the general revenge. It's no accident that it has been accompanied by the destruction of property, including more than one incident in which homes were burned down needlessly. Looting reflects a negation of the enemy population's humanity, making it acceptable to rifle through their personal belongings, even the most intimate ones, and choose what to take.[4]

The war on Gaza brought to mind the war of 1948, when there was widespread looting of the homes that Palestinians were forced to leave. Then the Israeli attacks were intended to wholly destroy the Palestinian nation and drive Palestinians out of Palestine, abolishing all traces of the villages where they had lived. As the war in Gaza continued and the Israeli army proceeded to destroy more of Gaza, I thought that we are back to square one – total lack of recognition by Israel of the existence of Palestine as a nation. Because of the gruesome behaviour of some Hamas members, the entire Palestinian nation was condemned and in the eyes of most Israelis lost its right to exist.

When I met an Israeli acquaintance to find out how he viewed the inexcusable behaviour of his country's citizen army, I found that we were at loggerheads. Every time I mentioned an atrocity committed against Palestinian civilians by the Israeli army in Gaza, he brought up a criminal act committed by Hamas on 7 October. Then with a sad voice he assured me that the Israelis are suffering from trauma and are grieving. He was incapable of seeing that the behaviour of the army was winning more recruits to Hamas. I thought again about the policy of fear the Israeli army had practised in Hebron as its way of deterrence and keeping the Palestinians under lock and key. The words of the commander manning that post came back to me: 'If we go into their houses all the time … if they feel terrified all the time, they will never attack us …' Is this the army's objective in Gaza?

Could it be that part of the explanation for why otherwise reasonable moral people in Israel are so accepting of the atrocities their army is

committing in Gaza is because they don't see what is taking place there?

Uri Avneri pointed out that in the 2014 war it was as though there were two wars being fought, the actual war and the war Israelis saw on their TV screens. That phenomenon persists and the gap is even wider in the 2023–4 war. The war is being well documented as it goes on by, among others, Al Jazeera. But these images of destruction and killing are not shown on Israeli television. Even though the Israeli public has other options if they wish to see what is going on – for example, they could tune in to Al Jazeera or even CNN – most choose not to, preferring to be wilfully ignorant of what suffering their army is causing to their Palestinian neighbours.

Some of those soldiers involved in the war who know what destruction they have wrought are not only unsympathetic but actually proud of what they have achieved. And even before the war has ended settler leaders are planning the return of settlements to Gaza. Meanwhile calls for ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank continue to be heard.

Berating his fellow journalists, Gideon Levy has said, 'The majority of the Israeli media has betrayed its mission and its professionalism in favour of denial, cover-up and enlistment in the service of propaganda.'[5]

Israel has not allowed journalists into Gaza except for several carefully controlled embedded visits. They did not want them to see what was taking place there. At the time of writing, ninety-five Palestinian journalists and media workers have been killed in Gaza.

Under cover of war, violence in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem has increased dramatically. Between 7 October 2023 and 3 January 2024, 313 Palestinians, including eighty children, have been killed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. According to *Haaretz*, the new protocol for the arrest of wanted persons is to encircle the home, call the suspect to exit the premises and, if he does not emerge, shoot an anti-tank missile at the building.

As the extent of the deaths and damage caused in Gaza became more evident I wondered where were the Israeli people and the voices of reason and compassion who had taken to the streets after the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon in 1982? Not a whimper. I asked one Israeli friend why and he answered sadly, 'Israel then was a different country.'

I should have known this, especially after reading the results of the latest Peace Index from Tel Aviv University. According to the survey, 94 per cent

of Jews, and 82 per cent of the total population in Israel, think the Israel Defense Forces have used the right amount (or not enough) firepower in Gaza. Three-quarters of all Israelis think the number of Palestinians harmed in the course of the war is justified to achieve their aims; fully two-thirds of Jewish respondents say the casualties are definitely justified and only 21 per cent say 'somewhat'.[6] However, between September and December 2023 a survey found that the percentage of people globally who view Israel positively dropped by an average of 18.5 per cent in fortytwo out of forty-three countries.[7]

What, then, will be the effect of this 'different country' that Israel has become on Israelis and their position in the world, and what will it mean for the future of our lives together, Palestinians and Israelis, living as we do in such close proximity? For, in this small area between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, there are 9.7 million Israelis of whom 2 million are Arab citizens, as well as 2.1 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and 3.2 million in the West Bank.

In June 1967 Israel annexed eastern Jerusalem. It has not formally annexed the rest of the West Bank, yet annexationist terminology was creeping in even before formal annexation had taken place. When the occupation began, the first military orders issued by Israel referred to the territory it occupied from Jordan as 'the West Bank'. Shortly afterwards it began using the biblical names 'Judaea and Samaria' to refer to the area. In time Israelis were comfortable using the word *mityashvim* ('inhabitants') instead of *mitnachlim* ('settlers') for West Bank settlers. The distinction between sovereign Israel and the occupied territory had become blurred.

The rest of the world, the West and the Arab states, continued to pay lip service to the slogan of the two-state solution, while remaining tolerant of Israeli plans for establishing new settlements and expanding existing ones where the Palestinian state was supposed to be established even after 1988, when the PLO declared its recognition of Israel. It seemed that these countries were prepared to formally keep this option open – yet only formally, without acting to bring it into being.

Under the cover of the war in Gaza more new settlements were being expanded in the West Bank and more Palestinian lands expropriated. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has estimated that 'a total of 1,105 people from twenty-eight communities – about 12 per cent

of the herding communities' population – had been displaced from their places of residence since 2022'. There was also an increase in the incidence of violence by Jewish settlers, supported by the Israeli army, against Palestinians while Israel proceeded with its practice of home demolitions. In the first month and a half after the start of the Gaza war the Israeli organisation Yesh Din recorded 225 incidents of Israeli violence in ninety-three Palestinian communities in the West Bank, with settlers killing nine Palestinians with live ammunition. All this took place with impunity from sanctions by the USA.

How much of this has changed with the war?

After thousands of house demolitions, on 14 February 2024 the US State Department finally reacted, condemning the Israeli decision to demolish the East Jerusalem home of Fakhri Abu Diab, a local community leader in the Silwan neighbourhood. Spokesman Matthew Miller said:

> We believe that demolition not only damages his home and his family and the lives they have built there, but the entire community who lives in fear that their homes may be next. This has been their family home for generations, part of the structure dates back to before 1967. He has been an outspoken community leader, including against demolitions, now his family is being displaced.
>
> The impact goes beyond this individual family. These acts obstruct efforts to advance durable and lasting peace and security that would benefit Palestinians and Israelis. They damage Israel's standing in the world, and they make it ultimately more difficult for us to accomplish all the things we're trying to accomplish that would ultimately be in the interest of the Israeli people. So we condemn them and will continue to urge they do not continue.

Yet Israel went ahead and demolished the house.

It is clear that as long as US pressure amounts to nothing more than urging and imploring, and falls short of denying Israel the arms it uses to wage war, it is unlikely to bring results.

In the course of the war, when more talk was heard of the plans to bring about a second Nakba for the Palestinians by forcing them out of Gaza, the USA made it clear that it would not tolerate a reduction in the area of Gaza.

Yet Israel is going ahead with plans to create a buffer zone along a kilometre-wide path on the Gaza Strip's border with Israel.

Then at long last there was some reaction from the USA to settler violence in the West Bank. In an Executive Order issued on 1 February 2024 President Joe Biden said the situation in the West Bank – in particular high levels of extremist settler violence, forced displacement of people and villages, and property destruction – had reached 'intolerable levels and constitutes a serious threat to the peace, security and stability'.[8]

After decades of tolerating Israel's building of new settlements funded by US money, rather than taking action against this colonial project, which is recognised as the main obstacle to peace, the USA acted to sanction a few individual settlers. A number of Israeli settlers were also sanctioned by France, the UK and Canada.

But there's an element of evasion in sanctioning individuals while failing to appreciate that they are not acting alone but with the help and support of the Israeli state and army. Yet no action was taken by the USA or the other countries to sanction the state which was proceeding with building and expanding more settlements.

Only recently has the European Union begun to discuss seriously enforcing international law regarding Israeli violations of human rights. The Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, and Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, have urged European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, to conduct an 'urgent review' of whether Israel is complying with human rights obligations under its trade agreement with the European Union.[9]

One hopeful consequence of the Gaza war was the interim decision of the International Court of Justice on 26 January 2024, when a large majority ordered Israel to refrain from any acts that could fall under the genocide convention and to ensure that its troops did not commit any genocidal acts in Gaza. It also ordered an improvement in the humanitarian situation. Even though Israel seems to have taken no notice, the decision marked a triumph for the rule of international law that could have long-term consequences for Israel's control over the Palestinians.

In July 2004, in a case before the ICJ in The Hague that I took part in, the court found that Israel's separation wall in the West Bank violated international law and should be dismantled. The fact that it still stands to this day means that no one should expect the results of the 26 January ruling to follow quickly.

In 2022 there was a second request after the 2004 one from the UN General Assembly for an advisory, or non-binding, opinion on the occupation. Judges were asked to review matters arising from Israel's 'occupation, settlement and annexation … including measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and from its adoption of related discriminatory legislation and measures'. After the address by the team representing Palestine, an unprecedented fifty-one countries and three international organisations spoke over the course of the six-day proceedings that began on 19 February 2024. The judges will take months to issue an opinion.

On the ground, one of the main obstacles to peace, which so far the international community has only opposed verbally, is the Israeli settlements, which are allowed to flourish. The last time that the USA took action to restrain Israel's strategy of building more settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was in 1991, when President George W. Bush linked the amount of aid Israel would receive to its settlement building, deducting the cost of settlement construction from US loan guarantees. After decades of pursuing the settlement project in the West Bank, Israel has left little room for the Palestinians to establish their state.

On 23 February 2024 Anthony Blinken, the US secretary of state, confirmed: 'It's been long-standing US policy under Republican and Democratic administrations alike that new settlements are counterproductive to reaching an enduring peace. They're also inconsistent with international law.' He overturned what came to be known as the Pompeo Doctrine, which had introduced the policy that Israeli settlements were 'not per se inconsistent with international law'. That had overturned a 1978 memo by State Department legal adviser Herbert Hansell that had deemed Israeli settlements beyond the 1949 armistice lines illegal.

Challenging President Biden's plan to support the establishment of a Palestinian state, Benjamin Netanyahu said on 19 February, 'In any scenario – with or without an arrangement – we will retain full security control west of Jordan.'

In his statement to the Israeli public, Netanyahu said that it was he who has prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state over the years. He then called on the government to support a resolution stating that Israel will oppose any attempt to force a Palestinian state on it unilaterally.

Settlements are still considered illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, yet they are ‘facts on the ground’ and their removal would have to come with a high price for Israel. Would the government as it is now constituted be willing to pay it? Would the country as a whole? What would it take to bring Israel to take that action?

On 21 February the Knesset approved the government’s decision that opposes any unilateral declaration of the establishment of a Palestinian state. The proposal was passed with a majority of ninety (ninety-nine supporters, nine against). And yet, should Israel not accept a fully sovereign Palestinian state, living at peace side by side with it, the alternative is that Israel would be transformed into an openly fascist, racist state that has to go from war to war. Past experience suggests that each war will be deadlier than the last. Israel would have to keep on fighting and in the long term this cannot work. Israel would remain a nation forever under siege.

It should be noted that Israel’s ability to continue waging wars is highly contingent on the support of the USA – described by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright as the ‘indispensable nation’. In 1997 the US senator Patrick Leahy introduced US human rights laws, which prohibit the US Departments of State and of Defense from providing military assistance to foreign security force units that violate human rights with impunity. A recent investigation by the *Guardian* based on a review of internal State Department documents and interviews with people familiar with sensitive internal deliberations revealed how special mechanisms have been used to shield Israel from US human rights laws and circumvent the Leahy law.[10] On 8 February the Biden administration has issued a National Security Memorandum requiring foreign governments to guarantee they will not violate human rights with weapons purchased from the USA. The *Washington Post* reported on 6 March 2024 that the USA has quietly approved and delivered more than 100 separate foreign military sales to Israel since the Gaza war began on 7 October, including thousands of precisionguided munitions, small-diameter bombs, bunker busters, small arms and other lethal aid. US officials told members of Congress in a recent classified briefing that the weapons transfers were processed without any public debate because each fell under a specific dollar amount that requires the executive branch to individually notify Congress. Only two approved foreign military sales to Israel have been made public since the start of conflict: $106 million worth of tank ammunition and $147.5 million worth

of components needed to make 155mm shells. Those sales invited public scrutiny because the Biden administration bypassed Congress to approve the packages by invoking emergency authority.[11]

What if, after the devastating Gaza war, the USA came under immense international pressure to stop shielding Israel from the application of these laws?

In December 2023 Al Haq, a human rights organisation in Ramallah I co-founded in 1979, and the UK-based Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) submitted a legal challenge to the UK Department for Business and Trade for the suspension of the sale of British weapons capable of being used in Israel's war on Gaza. The case was dismissed. Appealing to the High Court for a judicial review only brought another dismissal. GLAN argued that the High Court's decision was out of step with the growing international consensus.

As the fifth month of the war drew to an end with warnings of starvation and lethal disease spreading in Gaza, a few positive developments gave me a shred of hope. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, called on 23 February 2024 for 'accountability on all sides for violations seen over fifty-six years of occupation and sixteen years of blockade of Gaza, and up to today'. A day earlier independent UN experts called for an arms embargo against Israel, stating that exporting countries risked violating international humanitarian law if the weapons supplied were used in the Gaza war.

In the Netherlands an appeals court ordered the government to suspend all supplies of F-35 aircraft parts to Israel, citing violations of international and humanitarian law. Italy and Spain also blocked all arms exports to Israel as soon as the attacks in Gaza started.

US isolation was also evident at the ICJ court case for the advisory opinion on the occupation when it and a few others, including Fiji, were the only countries defending Israel.

After the devastation Israel has wrought on Gaza, can Israel continue to depend on continued US unconditional support using US arms and ammunition to wage more wars?

The US is trying to resurrect the Palestinian Authority and give it a role in administering Gaza. Yet the Palestinian Authority is a creature of the failed Oslo Accords, with many built-in limitations. It is counterproductive

to go back to that form of self-rule, which allowed the settlements to flourish. Under the auspices of a reorganised PLO, elections would have to be held to establish a new representative body representing all Palestinian political factions.

Among the other issues left unresolved after the Oslo Accords is the return of the refugees. Israel sees UNRWA as perpetuating the refugees' insistence on their right of return. It believes that if it succeeds in dissolving the organisation the refugee problem will be forgotten. But this is an illusion. There will be no lasting peace without resolving the refugee issue.

The very high human and material cost of the war in Gaza proves that what Israel fears from Palestine is Palestine's very existence.

In the course of this devastating war I have had one hopeful idea. What if this war should end, not by a ceasefire or a truce, as in other wars with Hamas, but with a comprehensive resolution to the century-old conflict between the Palestinian and Israeli people?

A few weeks after the start of the occupation in 1967, my father, Aziz Shehadeh, proposed the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel along the 1947 partition borders, with its capital in Jerusalem, as well as holding negotiations over all other outstanding issues. Now, nearly fifty-seven years later, there is near consensus that only if a Palestinian state is established will there ever be peace in the region.

We cannot afford to stand aside. True, the messianic religious right is dominant in Israeli politics and the Palestinian political field is fragmented and lacks a unified vision. The likelihood that change can come from within in the absence of outside pressure is minimal. A mechanism has to be found that would not leave the USA as the only sponsor of the ensuing negotiations, because the USA is not a neutral party. For many years it has been defending Israel diplomatically, protecting it from censure and providing it with financial assistance that has enabled it to pursue its settlement-building project and wars. At the ICJ proceedings the USA revealed its bias when it argued: 'The court should not find that Israel is legally obligated to immediately and unconditionally withdraw from occupied territory.' The negotiations must involve other major sponsors, including the UN and the global south, in addition to the USA to discuss all outstanding issues: full recognition of a Palestinian state, refugees, prisoner release, settlements and future relations between Israel and Palestine. The full force of international pressure is imperative to make this happen.

Leaving the USA as the sole sponsor of the negotiations will ensure that they fail.

Only if these changes take place will the immense suffering of the people of Gaza and the Israeli hostages and their families not be in vain.

For the majority of Palestinians, who are not part of Hamas; for those Israelis who could only watch with dismay at what their government was doing, powerless to stop the horror; for those of us who know with unshakeable certainty that the only future is for the two peoples to live together – the future might seem bleak. And yet, looking back at the history of the region, it is only after great upheavals that hopeful consequences follow. The Madrid Peace Conference came after the difficult years of the First Intifada.

Perhaps we can take some solace from the words of Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer, who died in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza.[12] Before he was killed he wrote:

> If I must die
> you must live
> to tell my story.
> If I must die
> let it bring hope,
> let it be a tale.

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NOTES

Part One: How How Did We Get Here?

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